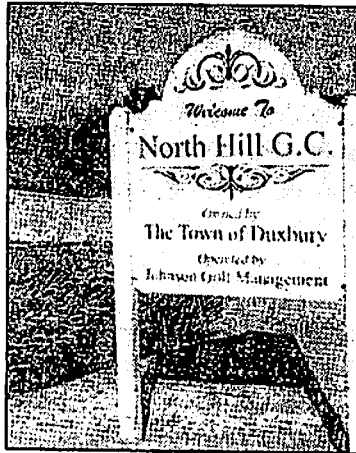


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Golfers Teed Off About New Policy



The weather may be cold, but tempers have been hot about a new tee time policy at North Hill Country Club.

By KEITH L. MARTIN

Golf may be "the gentlemen's game," but the recent dispute over a new policy regarding tee times at North Hill Country Club has been anything but polite between long-time members and the course's management.

In November, Johnson Golf Management, which has run North Hill since 1997, announced that they were changing course policy so that members would no longer be allowed to book an 18-hole

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round of golf at the nine-hole course. Instead, members would be able to book their first nine holes and afterwards, could play nine holes again if an open slot was available. If no spot was open, they would have to wait to complete their full round. Non-members, on the other hand, would still be able to book an 18-hole round.

This was not the first time this measure was proposed, however. A similar move was proposed in 2001, but members of the town's North Hill Advisory Committee helped to broker a compromise in which tee times would alternate between members and non-members and allowed 18 holes to be booked at one time.

The most recent announcement by Johnson was met with a great deal of criticism, especially from a 40-member group known as the North Hill Golfers Association. The group claimed that the policy discriminated against members and also was a move by the management company to rid themselves of memberships altogether.

"From the first day [managing the course], Johnson frowned on memberships," said John Kirtland of Crosscreek Lane, a member of the Association and the country club for 23 years. "They believe, I think, that they will get more pay on a per round basis only and they were forced by their contract with the town to have memberships. Johnson has finally found a way to get around that in my opinion."

Under the current fee structure, Duxbury residents pay \$678 and non-residents pay \$1041 per year for unlimited play at the course. Non-members pay \$16 for each nine hole round and \$27 for an 18-hole round on a weekday and \$18 per nine holes round and \$30 for each 18-hole round on the weekends.

Kirtland was one of many of the Association's members and others who filled the Mural Room last week during the latest North Hill Advisory Committee meeting to vent their frustration with the policy change and other issues. After the meeting, Johnson decided to amend their original proposal and prohibit both members and non-members from booking 18-hole rounds from now on.

"I think the reaction [to the new policy] is mixed," said Martin Desmery, chairman of the committee. "If you are a member, you happy because you are not discriminated against, but for everyone else,

now they are swept into the whole thing."

But members of the Association and other golfers are not happy and are threatening to take their course fees and other money spent at the clubhouse to another course.

Doug Johnson, president of Johnson Golf Management, said that it's the association members who are voicing the most outrage over the policy change, and if they want to play somewhere else, they have his blessing.

"The biggest complainers are guys who paid \$678 [for a resident membership] and if they paid in green fees would've spent \$2200 and more [at North Hill]," he said. "So if it comes to the point where they will try and go [to another course] then good luck if they do. This is a small group looking out for their own interests."

Johnson added that the tee time policy is only in effect on weekends and holidays and is a purely economical move on his company's behalf.

"If the course is available, anyone can play 18 holes," he said. "This is something we've looked at and given the economics and tracking golf course play, 90 percent of our rounds are nine holes so we felt it didn't seem to affect a lot of people so we decided to only accept nine-hole tee times. This is strictly an economic decision to increase revenue in a golf market that is becoming increasingly competitive."

Johnson said that the move is to try to get more people on the course during the prime hours of operations: holidays and weekends.

This is also not the first move by Johnson to try to increase revenues at the course. Just prior to the November announcement regarding the tee time change, Johnson met with the North Hill Advisory Committee to consult on raising fees by four percent. According to Desmery, after looking at the economics of the course, the committee thought this was reasonable and recommended the move to town selectmen to modify the contract with Johnson. This move was subject to approval by town counsel regarding the contract and Johnson and the town resolving a still ongoing issue regarding real estate taxes on a new clubhouse.

On December 18, Town Counsel Robert Troy issued a letter to Recreation Director Gordon Cushing in which he said that language in the contract only allows increases in fees every three years. In 2002, Johnson raised fees at the course, meaning that the

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next fee increase could occur in 2005 and no sooner.

Troy also negated modifying the contract, as choosing Johnson as the manager was done through a competitive RFP process and agreed on by both parties after the award, thus the procurement process must be respected.

"I essentially said that the terms of the contract have to be lived up to because if we allowed a fee increase...we're essentially letting the procurement process fall apart because there were others who bid [to manage the course]," Troy said.

In the same letter, Troy said he could find nothing in the contract to prohibit the manager from changing tee times and concluded it was in the parameters of management's authority to do so.

"Unless it is specified in the contract, the manager has the authority to set policies," he said. "What's the point otherwise? I think [Johnson] is trying to trade the tee time for the fee increase."

Desmery said that after the fee increase was nixed, Johnson did not consult with his committee, but instead informed them that there would be a change in tee times.

"In the past, he'd come to us, we'd consult and compromise and then approve something," he said. "With this, he told us he was doing it. Our group believes he should have sought town approval, but town counsel said no, he is the manager in control."

Desmery added that the committee will continue to work with Johnson as it has in

the past to "satisfy the interests of the town, Johnson Golf Management and the people who use the course."

"This can be worked out and it will be," said Desmery, adding that he did think some would leave the course because of Johnson's latest decision.

One of those people might be Kirtland depending on the Association's next move.

"This is on one hand an economic issue from the club manager's side and from the resident members, who are long-time supporters of the course, this is emotional as well," he said. "There are long-term friendships and good clean fun being lost because of this move and it is a shame. I am tied to this group of people, so if they go, I'd go."